Reviewed Paper | Volume 3 | Issue 7 | March 2016

International Journal of Informative & Futuristic Research | ISSN: 2347-1697

Contemporary Relevance of Nehru's Model of Secularism

Paper ID	IJIFR/ V3/ E7/ 063	Page No.	2571-2576	Subject Area	Political Science
Keywords	Nehru, Secular, Secularism, India, Constituent Assembly				

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Abstract

Nehru was perceptive enough to recognize that India can be integrated into a nation only by making it secular state. Despite its partition in 1947 for the creation of Pakistan and the consequent exodus of a large number of Muslims to that country, this strength had remained substantial in India. Besides them, the Sikhs and the Christians too were significant religion based communities in the demographic structure of India. The integration of these religions minorities was not possible through assimilation. It was possible only through the adoption of accommodation. And, this could be done only if India became a secular state. That is why, without using the term 'Secular State' or 'Secularism' in the constitution, he makes India a secular states. This brief write-up is an attempt to deal with Nehru's model of secularism and its contemporary relevance. It has been divided into four parts. The first deals with the meaning and evolution of the concept of secularism. The second discusses Nehru's model of this concept. The third describes its institutionalization by him. And, the last examines its relevance in the present context and the threats to it from the forces of fascism that have emerged after the 2014 parliamentary elections.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is time to have a fresh look at the Nehru Phenomenon on Secularism Nehru argued that secularism could form the only basis for the national unity in a multi-religious society. Communalism was their clearly anti-national and a danger to national unity. He believed that Indian people would remain committed to secularism from his study of Indian history.

www.historymarg.com
ISSN: 2347-1697
International Journal of Informative & Futuristic Research (IJIFR)
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In his view, elements of secular outlook were deeply embedded in Indian historical traditions and Indian culture.

2. BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM

This paper focuses on Nehru's model of secularism because during the Nehru era there was a vast literature on him. But it did not do justice to the Nehru phenomena on because it was mostly building his personality cult. According to the authors at that time, he was a great nationalist leader, a revolutionary, a statesman and a thinker. But we are reaching another stage in the production of the political literature on contemporary India. It is marked by a condemnation of Nehru. But this is not the right way to understand Nehru. No doubt he was a striking and remarkable personality. His role and legacy could be understood only if perspective. This paper attempts to see the relevance of Nehru's idea of secularism in the present context and the threats faces from the forces of fascism that have emerged after the 2014 parliamentary elections.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Historical methods have been used for this work. Constituent assembly debates are also applied for this purpose. Many important primary sources as well as secondary sources are consulted for the fairer conclusion. 'Frontline magazine have been referred.

4. MEANING OF SECULARISM

Secularism is the belief that politics, morals, education, arts, Literature etc. ought to be freed from the stranglehold of religion. The origin of this concept may be traced from the Renaissance that influenced Europe from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. This movement aimed at the sixteenth century. This movement aimed at the revival of the Greek spirit of reason and sought to liberate the society from the dominance of religion. But the concept of secularism gathered real strength from the Enlightenment, which had become a powerful force in eighteenth century Europe. it laid stress on reason and rationality. The promotion of the scientific temper and rejection of the superstitious and blind faith in religion helped the growth of secularism.[1]

Broadly speaking, two divergent concept of secularism had developed in Western Political Thought. According to the first, which may be called liberal concept of secularism, the state should neither be religious nor anti-religious. The state should not only have no religion but also be neutral towards it. There should be, as a matter of fact, complete separation of religion and politics. Religion should be regarded as a private matter of an individual having no place in public affairs. The second concept, which may be labelled as the Marxian concept, regards secularism as an anti-thesis of religion. The Marxists believe that the inducement of religion was developed by the capitalist class to establish its hegemony and for countering the class struggle by using religion as an opium.[2]

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ISSN: 2347-1697
International Journal of Informative & Futuristic Research (IJIFR)
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5. NEHRU'S MODEL OF SECULARISM

Nehru's concept of secularism was different from that of the others. While M.N. Roy and revolutions like Bhagat Singh and the Communists of India favoured a secularism based on an anti-religious approach, Nehru advocated that which was neither anti-religious nor irreligious but was a religious. It meant Dharma Nirpekshta (Neutrality toward Religion). It implied keeping equal distance from all religious as well as equal treatment to the people belonging to all the religious. Here it is pertinent to point out that Nehru's Secularism was also different from that of Mahatma Gandhi. While Gandhi favoured equal respect to all the religions despite his scientific temper and rational Outlook Nehru's agnostic outlook made him to favour neutrality towards religions. But it has to be acknowledged that Nehru was not against religion.[3] He viewed secularism as an anti-thesis of communalism. While the latter created hatred and bad blood among the religious comminute. For Nehru, the former promoted communal harmony. While communalism was based on negative feelings, secularism was based on positive sentiments.[4] He did not want the Indian state to identify itself with any religion. But he advocated state interference in religious codes for bringing about social reform and rooting out evil practices.[5]

Although Nehru's secularism has been described as un-Indian by some of his critics, yet Nehru did try to evolve an Indian model of secularism. He appears to have been influenced both by the logic of international politics and the national interest of India in this context. The peculiar character of Nehru's secularism can be understood only by keeping in view the above formulations.[6]

The fact that Nehru did not favour on the inclusion of the word 'secularism' in Indian constitution, is evident from his silence in the Constituent Assembly when K.T.Shah moved on amendment on November 15,1948 that the words 'secular, federal, socialist' be included in clause 1 of Article 1 of the constitution, Nehru did not respond. Even his law minister and chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, did not mention the word secular or secularism in his response. He concentrated on the word socialist and argued that the socialist principles are already embodied in our constitution and it is unnecessary to accept this amendment.[7] Nehru is reported to have remarked "word he has been used a great deal, this secular state business .May I will beg all humanity those gentlemen who use this word often to consult some dictionary before they use it? It is brought in at every conservable stage. I just do not understand it".[8]

It has been perceptively observed by a well-known scholar, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya that Nehru's model of Secularism was a quest for ensuring justice and equality to all the citizen of India irrespective of their creed. This found reflection in the preamble of Indian Continuation. It clearly stated first Justice and then liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship followed by "Equality of status and opportunity". According to Bhattacharya, "Nehru believed that it was absurd to claim that by saying that we are a secular state, we have done something amazingly, we have only done something which

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ISSN: 2347-1697
International Journal of Informative & Futuristic Research (IJIFR)
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every country does except a few misguided and backward countries in the world. The aim was to ensure justice to the individual or the group in minority.[9]

6. INSTITUTIONALIZED BY NEHRU

Nehru institutionalized his concept of secularism by getting it incorporated in the Indian Constitution. Although the word 'secular' found no place in the Constitution before the 42th Amendment in 1976, it was implicit in the values of equality, freedom and justice, that had been included in the Preamble of the Constitution. The Right to Equality, the Right to Religious Freedom and the Educational and Cultural Rights listed in the Chapter on Fundamental Rights as a matter of fact, aimed at making Secularism a basic feature of the fundamental law of the land or a part of the basic structure of Indian Constitution. Nehru also abolished separate electorates but also managed the introduction of Universal Adult Franchise for the purpose.

Nehru decision to choose the parliamentary system of government instead of the presidential one was also influenced by his quest for secularism. Perhaps, he favoured the parliamentary system as only it could accommodate various religious communities in the power structure at the national and state levels. Nehru also tried political socialization of the masses of India for educating them about the utility of secularism for the country. He toured all parts for addressing public meetings in which he kept on emphasing the need for secularism.[10]

It has been widely accepted that Nehru was able to make India a secular state despite the fact that it did not have a secular society. As has already been mentioned, secularism is one of the fundamental values of the Political System. The Indian Constitution accords equal status to the members of all the religious communities. The followers of all religions not only have the right to believe them but also to propagate them. They have also been given the right to establish and administer their educational institution.

The Congress, which remained the dominant party in India during the Nehru era, gave adequate representation to the persons belonging to the minority communities in the government, in the party organization and in the Parliament at the Center and in the legislature at state level. They were also able to hold high positions in administration, judiciary and defence forces. Further, Nehru must be given credit for removing the feelings of insecurity from the minds of minorities in general and the Muslims in particular. During his tenure it is pertinent to state here that this had become essential because the partitions and communal riots had created a fear psychosis in their minds. Thus it has to be recognized that Nehru was certainly able to secularize the Indian Polity to a considerable extent.

However, Nehru failed to launch any concerted and systematic campaign against communalism. Perhaps he wrongly believed that communalism would vanish away after the disappearance of British from India. He also believed was that industrial development would wipe off communalism and promotes secularism. It is also widely known that the allotment of the congress ticket was done by the Nehru era by helping in view the

www.historymarg.com
ISSN: 2347-1697
International Journal of Informative & Futuristic Research (IJIFR)
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religious composition of the parliamentary and Assembly constituencies not withstanding these deviations, Nehru on the whole did follow the creed of secularism throughout his political life.[11]

7. FINDINGS & CONCLUSION

This leads us to the question: How far does Nehru's concept of secularism framed in the first half of the twentieth century in accordance with the needs and goals of India at that juncture during the colonial and the post-colonial phases, remain relevant for meeting the challenges that our country is facing in the twenty first century in the era of liberalization privatization and Globalization? The well-considered opinion and categorical answer of the author is that Nehru's concept of secularism has become all the more relevant today?

It not only necessary for safeguarding the unity and integrity of the country but also for safeguarding its secular character from the threats that are being posed by the forces of revivalism and fundamentalism which have become very powerful since in the last two decades of the twentieth century although these received a setback in 2004 and 2009 Parliamentary elections, The forces of communalism have acquired the Central stage in the 2014 parliamentary elections. As a matter of these have become all the more powerful in all the subsequent state Assembly elections except in Delhi and Bihar. Hence it has become all the more necessary for saving the democratic fabric of our polity from the forces of fascism who are hell-bent on destroying it.[12]

Therefore, all liberal, secular, democratic and progressive elements of India Society must close their ranks and should rise to the occasion for preserving and promoting Nehru's legacy of secularism. But this does not mean that we keeping on making a mechanical application of his concept of secularism. It will have to be done in a dynamic and pragmatic manner by re-interpreting and modifying it in accordance with the requirements of the change national and the International scenario in the twentieth first century. We should not become complacent in this context. The danger from the forces of revivalism fundamentalism and fascism has been magnified.

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ISSN: 2347-1697
International Journal of Informative & Futuristic Research (IJIFR)
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